Participant-Making

Participant-Making: Bridging The Gulf Between Community Knowledge And Academic Research

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ABSTRACT

Too often in social research for design, academic knowledge is privileged at the expense of other knowledge and ways of knowing, although by overlooking insights from other participants this academic meaning-making may be wasteful and/or damaging to relationships. In this paper, we describe a project that focuses on establishing academic/ community relations to look at how knowledge issues are handled in setting up participative projects. We touch on the ethics of the 'informed consent' required for the ethics approval process and that of generating and sharing project outcomes in a way that reflects team membership, considering how to share credit, encourage diverse opinion and ensure some value in participating for all participants. Since a key outcome of the study is intended to be policy recommendations as to how to involve community groups in research projects, we take a highly reflexive approach. We reflect here on how we, as academic researchers, became participants and what we made available to our partners in research, to do the same.

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INTRODUCTION

In Britain, there is a new political will to engage with communities. Far from there being 'no such thing as society' (Thatcher 1987), we are now told that communities are its very bedrock, reaffirmed by the new Minister for Civil Society who recently stated that wisdom is "distributed throughout society" (Clark 2010).

Yet, despite calls for shifts towards more co-operative modes of inquiry, many academics researching into communities do not share this view of knowledge distribution, instead holding allegiance to qualities such as remoteness, objectivity and/or expertise which affect the relations they establish with the social world that constitutes their subject. These reservations about engagement exacerbate the common perception of an inexorable divide between the abstract world of 'expert' researchers and the ordinary everyday lives of their fellow citizens. Beyond the problems that this perceived gap introduces, not least in terms of recruiting participants, this lack of engagement rules out many of the processes that have been shown to work effectively with groups and elicit data that can be directly and usefully applied to real contexts.

In this paper, we focus on the experience of participation. We look particularly at participants in academic research projects and particularly at those projects which involve communities. We examine the ethical and pragmatic reasons for an action research approach to the co-investigation of responsible participatory practices in projects about the design of technology. And we do so in a reflexive way, including our ambitions and experiences as researchers. Indeed, this paper is predicated on the belief that we must be thoughtful and open before, during and after any research engagement to which we invite other people and that we should only speak of what we know. Therefore, in this paper, we give only the experiences of the academic research team, with the intention of writing collaboratively about other experiences as they arise. We talk about how we have become participants as well as how we offer this invitation to (and hope to structure the process for) others.

We are specifically addressing researcher responsibility *during* research, starting with what comes out of a considerate engagement process, above and beyond any impact that research can have outside these bounds. This might seem a limited topic, but we argue that what follows and its impact on participants and the wider communities around us is highly determined by how these relations are built. This is evidenced in work such as Light et al (2009), describing the process of how the ownership of a technology project moved from the research team to become a community initiative.

The paper walks through the planned engagement processes of a small project, *Participants Utd!*, that was wholly occupied with researching the experience of being engaged and researched. It is a reflection on several years of participatory work around technology by

the four members of the research team, together with invited participants from our partner projects. We use the description to underline our research choices to promote shared responsibility in starting to collaborate with community groups.

It must be stressed that we are not reporting findings of a project designed to produce change in the world as such, but one which looks at the research process itself. Thus, most of the paper is taken up with discussing the reasoning behind our research design to draw attention to the shaping of the research processes and provide a rationale for them in social, political and ethical terms. We do so in the knowledge that what marks out effective community/academic projects in complex fields such as ICT design, development and use is an investment in balancing power, sharing ownership of ideas and generating mutual respect.

Theoretical Background

Depending on one's academic discipline, research through participation is a more or less acceptable undertaking. A strong movement in the design of interactive systems - and product design more generally - is to involve potential and actual users. However, much involvement of informants is to reveal problems with proposed design in practical ways, such as finding usability problems or spotting occasions when tacit knowledge has been ignored, rather than working with social and cultural perspectives that might be seen as community-based or democratic. There are notable exceptions to this in participatory design (PD) work, as, for instance, Greenbaum and Kyng (1991) document, where the wider context of use and social impacts of change form a key part of the research, and political commitments are apparent. Building on these commitments, Muller (2002) reflects on how new contexts of PD, such as working in communities, differ from those with more tightly defined organizational structures. More recently, DiSalvo et al (2008) propose forms of engagement particularly suited to community work and Bossen et al (2010) revisit a PD context to trace the benefits of a programme of work and find it stretches beyond immediate participants to a wider circle. Other recent work, such as that of Botero and Saad-Sulonen (2008) who focus on the participation of citizens in looking at the design of a tool for use in the city, largely concentrate on method and outcome, not means of engagement. Light (2010) draws attention to this tendency in PD work and explores the social features that make community PD distinct, including recruitment of participants, typical motivation and researcher accountability.

ICT design is not alone in seeing benefit in participatory processes. Pain and Kindon (2007) suggest that critical, feminist and post-colonial social and environmental geographies are being strengthened by putting principles and politics into action through participative work, but that no orthodoxies have yet evolved as to how. For Pain and Kindon, who bring a feminist perspective:

Ownership of the research is shared with participants, who negotiate processes with the academic researcher. The approaches emphasise social action as a valuable part of research. They are necessarily unpredictable, exploratory, and relational. Thus participatory approaches have been heralded as offering opportunities for more emancipatory and empowering geographies with transformative development as their key objective. (Pain and Kindon 2007: 2807)

By contrast, Cooke and Kothari's collection of essays (2001) points to many dangers with claiming to emancipate through participatory processes, reflecting that they necessarily involve power imbalances and also often substantial constraints in what is being offered by way of ownership to others, rendering promises unrealistic.

In traditional sociology, participation is treated with caution - not because of unmet promises but because it is seen to call into question the whole epistemological basis of study. Taking an approach that adopts the distance of the natural scientist who explores inert phenomena, the social scientist seeks to gain research legitimacy by judging actions from outside the social processes that are the object of study. Indeed, the defence of participatory action research mounted by Krimerman (2001) in asking "should social inquiry be conducted democratically" is illustrative of the degree to which engagement is seen as a form of defeat: partial, opinionated, 'gone native', subjective… the list of illegitimacies goes on. However advocates of action research such as McNiff (McNiff with Whitehead 2002) take on this critique:

[The] rationalists have a point. While personal claims to knowledge can be justified and valid ... these claims cannot stand alone in research contexts without some form of corroborating evidence. ... Action research can be seen as a disciplined enquiry, where a practitioner systematically investigates how to improve practice and produces evidence for the critical scrutiny of others ... [and where] the process of theorizing is an ongoing dialectical engagement with inherently volatile problematics. (2002:103-4)

And looking back, the social scientist Schutz gives a cogent argument for why sociology is not the study of phenomena outside of the self in the same way that physics may be:

The social world is not essentially structureless. It has a particular meaning and relevance structure for the human beings living, thinking, and acting therein. They have preselected and preinterpreted this world by a series of common-sense constructs of the reality of daily life, and it's these thought objects which determine their behavior… The thought objects constructed by the social scientists refer to and are founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thought of man [sic] living his everyday life. (Schutz 1973:6)

Such a view goes beyond merely including the subject of the research in the research activity. It resituates the knowledge of different partners, offering a common platform from which to study social phenomena and de-privileging the researcher. In Schutz' view,

understanding the meaning of a phenomenon for researchers should be carried out with deference to the meaning-making processes that are already taking place. 'The social scientist can construct typified models of social activity' because every member of society has intimate access to these common-sense constructs and members of a scientific community are in 'a position to engage in publicly controllable interpretative activity' (Heritage 1984:50). Further, they cannot afford to ignore them.

A crude reading of this position has the potential to ignore much of what Cooke and Kothari's book (2001) illustrates: that knowing is situated and prone to power relations. And Potter and Wetherell (1987) discuss at length the challenge that researchers have to speak for the processes they are observing, while Spivak (1985) calls into question the validity of any attempt to speak for a less powerful group. However, the positions are not exclusive. We can adopt Schutz' stance that we are all meaning-makers. We can also acknowledge later post-colonial and post-modern insights into the political nature of knowing and giving voice to knowledge. To do so is to produce a strong argument for an embodied, situated and engaged form of research, in which social phenomena are constructed and analyzed by participants as part of making the research happen. Such a position takes both the shared humanity and the differences in understanding and perspective between people in different social and political contexts seriously.

Jones (1999) searches for a theoretical position which accepts the post-modern view of knowledge as partial, constructed and imbued with power relations and integrates this into the construction of political projects and actions. He attempts to resolve the tension raised by the viewing of knowledge as relative but needing to take decisive political action beyond the individual, advocating the development of contextual theories:

[W]here the concepts used incorporate formalized flexibility… concepts only become fully developed in their implementation in specific contexts. And most significantly, contextual theories do not prioritise any ontological field in this process of theory construction: context is simultaneously spatial, temporal and social. (Jones 1999: 531)

With these positions in mind, the authors describe the acts of *researching* and *being researched* as examples of a kind of practice that requires extensive meaning-making by both researchers and partners (.e. all participants involved), one which produces situated knowledge rather than abstract information, and, thus, one where the value of what is learnt must be in the process as well as in any final outcomes. Indeed, one outcome may be *many* descriptions of process.

Clearly this also has implications for researcher reflexivity. We argue that the socially responsible position for this work is one in which the author/researcher speaks as a participant rather than as a person outside the process being described. And we undertake to do so, both in describing our starting point – in writing here – and in reporting back to the funding councils that have supported this work and to whom we wish to address our

learning – amongst others – about being researched.

This is not a wholly new position for researchers with certain political/theoretical commitments. For instance, feminist research rejects the objectivity of mainstream social inquiry, adopting instead a variety of situated orientations such as those advocated by Trauth et al (2006), where seeking to speak from the margins is a key precept. That they, like us, must explain their positions so fully is indicative of its contrast to much of what constitutes social research.

In sum, in forming our research and in writing here, we are attempting to throw off the mantle of academia which functions like a cloak of obscurity to privilege the researcher's view. Any privilege to be claimed is not exclusive and is owed to researcher experience at reflecting upon social phenomena, not taken as an academic right. So, we have two arguments for avoiding an artificial separation between academic researchers and other participants: the first is that they are also researchers and to underestimate this tendency is to disadvantage the research; the second is that we have no justification to take time and ideas from others as our *a priori* due, since we are, like those who inform us, merely committed to certain practices of inquiry to earn our bread.

From Communities to Participants

This paper looks at *participant-making*, at how the constitution of 'participants' takes place. To do so, we reflect particularly on the role of preparation, the giving of consent and the implied ownership of outcomes. We do so in the context of working with groups drawn from the rich and diverse communities around us. And although we are working together as participants in particular endeavors that cast us in particular roles and relations, we also heed the words of Sen (2006):

> *[T]he disparate pulls – of history, culture, language, politics, profession, family, comradeship, and so on – have to be adequately recognized, and they cannot all be drowned in a single-minded celebration only of community.* Sen (2006:38)

We have emphasized *process* because we see these roles as flexible, as negotiated and as formative. They are formative of the groups we are engaged with, of who we understand ourselves to be and also because they create the potential for outcomes as product of these interactions. So we identify some key transferable learning to emerge from bringing everyone together:

* how to support the diverse meaning-making that must inevitably take place in a project where formal researchers meet groups with other priorities, and
* how to give this meaning-making space, time and permission to flourish and become a focus.

Process is particularly interesting because Light (Light 2010, Light and Miskelly 2008)

argues that much method breaks down when working with communities on designing social change projects. Gone are the formal structures that ensure repeatability. These priorities are replaced by accountability to the intended beneficiaries of the project:

This is not a call to ... abandon political and cultural shrewdness or sensitivity to one's own position in a group. It is rather an acknowledgement that others in the room operate with these qualities too. (Light 2010)

When working in community contexts, purism of methodology and comparability of technique are the least of researchers' concerns. Work with communities, in particular that involving social change, requires researchers to 'get involved, be flexible, make friends, stay honest, choose sides (selectively), muck in and deliver' (Light 2010). And Winschiers-Theophilus et al (2010) illuminate the complexity of cross-cultural participatory design activities as part of re-thinking concepts and methods for their work in sub-Saharan Africa. They seek to keep the core values of participatory design but strip them of cultural bias in their discussion of *being participated*, also throwing attention back on relations. So, far from maintaining the distance and objectivity that can be understood as integrity in representing knowledge to the international social research community, to succeed at all, work with communities requires integrity in its dealings with others involved directly in the research question. This paper posits some shapes that this might take, working in a British context.

Participants United

Researchers on the Participants Utd! project were drawn together because they share – with others – the notion that the creativity and experience of communities, residents, groups and individuals is equally valuable to that of academics, other professionals and those in power over them. As researchers, each of us endeavors to work collaboratively with communities and individuals, participating in academic research projects to find ways of ensuring all voices are heard, that they are listened to, and that credit is given where it is due. As a further goal, all are committed to designing projects that lead to radical change in the ways that participants are included in, or become responsible for, the decisions that affect their lives. The group also shares a strong desire to communicate this to the academy, informing and improving the way universities engage with communities through research. Indeed, the four of us met first in this combination at a research day organized by a funding council, brought together when we took an assertive stand on processes of participation.

Following this recognition of common interest, we committed to work together further and secure money to do so. The result was the small project, Participants Utd!, which assembled first us, a disparate group of researchers, and then a series of participants with whom we had worked in previous research groups. (This might be considered recruitment by snowballing.) We have now been hosting a series of workshops and a two-day summit designed to bring together people from different communities who have participated in

research. Beyond uniting the participants (as its title suggests) the aims of the project are to jointly assess different approaches to, and contexts of, community engagement by researchers, and to collaboratively develop principles, methods and strategies for intervention that can shape future funded research and engagement initiatives.

Over the series of workshops the Participants Utd! research team aims to:

1) Undertake a joint analysis of community engagement with all participants identifying whose views are heard and whose are not in the process (defining what communities interpret as 'being heard') whilst evaluating different approaches used in different research contexts.
2) Explore motivations for, and barriers to, participation and engagement among both academics and communities in the four initiatives involved.
3) Share understandings and seek to make interventions in public policy in relation to encouraging and supporting better participation and engagement.
4) Generate a needs analysis for training materials that can be commissioned and then used by communities and academics involved in research council collaborations in general (and also the Connected Communities programme being run in the UK by a group of research councils at present).

Four groups of participants have been invited to the symposium to share their experiences of participating in academic research. Light, Rogers and Wakeford (leading the Participants Utd! research project) decided early on that they would take part in the symposium as a fifth group to share their experiences as academics engaging in research. This manifested our commitment to the idea that every member of a group is a participant and has reflective material to offer the process, although the nature of the contribution may be different. So that this degree of engagement would not leave the group without anyone looking after the running of the day - with so many people meeting for the first time - Egglestone was to be removed from the group and charged with documenting the symposium on video and arranging a neutral facilitator to lead the symposium workshops, thereby freeing up colleagues to take part more fully. Beyond the conceptual benefits of viewing researchers as engaged in participation, the approach was anticipated to have the added benefit of enabling the researchers to reflect on the workshop process as it happened.

The Participant Groups

Apart from the Participants Utd! research team, the people attending the two-day summit hosted at the University of Central Lancashire were invited from groups and communities with whom the researchers had worked previously, so that they could become partners in the project. Participants had all been involved in academic research either as the subjects of research inquiry or as active participants working with researchers to explore issues together using a series of participatory action research methods. In addition, key facilitators who had been part of research processes previously were invited to join the sessions to reflect their contribution, to reflect on their contribution and to ease the integration of

groups.

Egglestone and Rogers' group had formerly participated in a large EPSRC Digital Economy research project called 'Bespoke'. The partners' role in the Bespoke project was as members of a team of community journalists working on a housing estate in Preston, Lancashire within the ward boundaries of Callon and Fishwick (Egglestone and Rogers 2010). Over two years they have produced audio, video and written content for a community newspaper and website set up to test a new participatory design methodology (HYPERLINK "http://www.bespokeproject.org/"www.bespokeproject.org).

Light talked to two potential groups about the symposium. The first was a group of East End London men, The Geezers, who meet weekly as part of a charity initiative to avoid loneliness and isolation in older men in later life. The Geezers had worked with a team of researchers at the University of London as part of an arts project investigating values and future technology with older people (Light et al 2009). They continued to pursue their vision of water turbines for use in powering homes (*Active Energy*) even after the project ended (Light et al 2009, 2010). With the support of engineers, artists and academics, and in particular artist-facilitator Loraine Leeson, they are continuing to agitate for consideration of 'lost' technologies whose time might have come again. They are interested to see how far they, as non-professionals who are fast becoming experts in their chosen field, can have influence on national sustainability policies.

Another group who have been considering participation with the project are drawn from collaborations further north in England. Sheffield is home to two geographically proximate Asian refugee communities who are traditionally on different sides of several emotional and political boundaries: Thai Karen and Burmese people. Some of the Sheffield-based Karen and Burmese people have been working together with Sheffield Hallam University staff to learn community reporting skills and report on events of interest to the two groups, even negotiating the crisis in trust that occurred over the hacking of their website, which amongst other things, has sensitized them to political issues of representation (Lockley and Green 2010).

The group working with Wakeford is drawn from a project based at Newcastle University. Stemistry (HYPERLINK "http://www.stemistry.com/"www.stemistry.com/) is a contribution made to science by members of the public who come together to discuss stem cell research and offer their fears, hopes, questions and creative responses. In 2006, Wakeford was offered funding to undertake a science dialogue project with people who would not normally be involved in such 'outreach' activities, conducted in any way so long as the primary focus was research on stem cells and on its ethical dimensions. (Since then this has generically become known as 'public engagement' work). Two groups emerged as project partners, the United Black Youth Association – made up of young, largely South Asian, women – and a Tyneside-based writers group. Facilitator Lisa Matthews, undertook a series of workshops with both groups, allowing them to explore the issues and resulting in a series of written

outputs under the collective name *stemistry.com*. Subsequently, two UK research councils asked Wakeford and Matthews to undertake consultations with 'hard to reach' groups about stem cell research. The groups involved in stemistry.com collaborated at a residential workshop and helped produce a report which was presented to the research councils.

Gaining participants, building involvement

The project is devised so that the principal research takes place when all the participants assemble for two days of reflective social activities in a summit. As with any project, someone has to instantiate it and set its goals and this aspect belonged firmly to the participants who had assembled at the research council event and found themselves with a common agenda for change, .e. the academic researchers. There is always a balance to be struck between being overly directive in a new project and overwhelming tentative co-inquirers with an under-developed plan that leaves them too much to create for themselves. Neither of these states is optimally motivational. In this instance, we had no compunction about setting clear goals and convincing a research council (the AHRC) to fund us. However, it has been pointed out (e.g. Light and Miskelly 2008) that the challenges of getting funding require researchers to abandon their more open principles of co-shaping research programmes, leading to issues of ownership of exactly the kind raised by Cooke and Kothari (2001).

That said, the Preston-based symposium offered participants the chance to meet each other, to network and to share and learn new skills from each other. It was designed as a series of open focused but non-directive exercises to elicit ideas and develop contributions in the spirit of Light et al (2009) and Egglestone and Rogers (2010). As well as being recorded, all participants would use film-making to convey their views and experiences.

Significantly for our discussion here, prior to the two day summit which brought these groups together formally in the new project, each of the groups spent half a day as part of their existing organization preparing for it. This preparatory workshop was conceived to get over two key ethical challenges in working together, as well as a number of practical ones.

Informed consent

One intention for the preparatory workshop was to ensure that those participating understood fully to what they were being invited to commit whilst being reassured they would be under no pressure to do so. In Britain, it is now customary good practice to request *informed consent* from any participant in a research project. Coming from medical research, the standard forms and processes used to gain this consent work to position recruited participants as vulnerable subjects at the whim of researcher procedures, in need of anonymity so that personal information cannot be associated back to them and as donors of information rather than co-creators of knowledge, or as researchers in their own right. This is a barrier to viewing all participants as equal in contributing, if different in viewpoint,

interests and/or role.

We have made it a condition of participation in the Preston summit that participants are willing to go on record – either in film or written form – as the owners of their information and ideas. We would like to quote them and their affiliations as part of acknowledging their contribution. In the best of all possible worlds, this condition would itself have been part of the negotiation of opinions to happen at the summit. However, if willingness to represent oneself is made a summit entry condition, then some element of choice remains. The groups will only send people happy in the role of spokespeople. to the event. This situates the choice: it becomes a matter of who attends, rather than defining the event they are attending. (This is symptomatic of the way that the limits of time and the dynamics of funding play out to move choice towards increasingly superficial aspects of such projects.)

What the half-day workshop is able to do is allow for 'informed' consent of a more meaningful kind than the usual quick read. The ramifications and opportunities of participation (meeting other groups, going 'on record', helping to write the guidance in whatever way seems appropriate) have been explored as a slow and thoughtful process with a group that is used to research and has on-hand researchers and facilitators with whom some trust is already established.

The impact of this existing relationship is also of interest here. The medical model of research with subjects assumes that there are no personal relationships involved. The white coat of the researcher in clinical trials creates anonymity for the protagonist. This emphasis on role gives authority and inspires trust institutionally, rather than personally. It may work to manage the potential social awkwardness of conducting research where the only research interest is in people's bodies. However, the respect of mutual anonymity is a long way from the respect that forms the basis of working with known facilitators and partners of community research. By contrast, in collaborative projects, roles become less prominent - researchers are interested in the thoughts and actions of the groups and enter into the work with thoughts of long-term relations. The 'white coat' may be the anonymous uniform of the generic researcher, but we are judged on more personal criteria and – since we have worked together with our groups before – on their previous experience of us. So this very trust – yet another kind of knowledge – also goes against the spirit of the written consent form. We cannot ensure that 'informed' means knowing what will happen, rather than trusting us that it will be valuable. We can never produce an information stream free of the social relations involved. It may be sensible and fair that any judgment made in a workshop situation is about the people as much as the activities, but it again resists the impartiality of formal notions of consent.

The workshop is also a chance to set the agenda for the bigger meeting in such a way that ethical approval can be gained using material that has been developed with all participants and not agreed by the academic researchers alone. This is important, since the approval process determines more or less completely how topics are to be covered and which

processes are to be used. Once agreed, the content and processes are not supposed to deviate from what is negotiated between the ethics board and the research lead. In this project, it will be apparent that we (and the facilitators) will be drawing together opinion from four workshops and therefore acting as mediators, but we can, at least, by running these workshops, include the modifications that arise from discussions. This has the further benefit that we are able to demonstrate rigor in seeking informed consent. By behaving consistently with an ethical position, our rigor, ironically, buys some leniency in what we have to commit to as part of getting approval. We are allowed a little more 'wiggle-room'. This leniency is then itself another tool to prise away at the dominance of the researchers' agenda over other considerations.

The Principle of Exchange

Another ethical benefit of the preparatory session exists in enabling the organisers of the Preston summit to make it of more tangible value to the range of groups participating. As well as organising travel, accommodation, dietary requirements etc. researchers leading these workshops are inviting their groups to identify someone relevant to their activities they would like to meet. These 'thematic mentors' will be drawn from academia and industry and may include (for example): documentary film-makers who will assist community journalists from Preston with the crafting of their digital storytelling. At their half-day preparation session hosted by Light, The Geezers expressed an interest in meeting with a senior executive from British Waterways. The research team has committed to identify and invite thematic mentors for each group based on each group's wishes.

This *would-like-to-meet* session is a significant one in the politics of working with the groups. The social good of participation can be seen specifically in the shape of what is offered back to participants *here and now* as well as to some notional group that will benefit in the fullness of time. As Dray et al point out (2011):

Part of understanding what we have to offer and to gain involves understanding and being clear about the benefits that will come from conducting our work successfully in the field. Quite often there is no immediate benefit to the group who is helping us with our work, despite the long-term potential of our learning. For us, on the other hand, there may be a series of professional accolades: As researchers, we may be able to generate publishable research findings and disseminate our work. (Dray et al 2011)

The concept of *would-like-to-meet* is explicit acknowledgement that all of us can have interests in the work and that all of us are committing valuable time and thought to it. Given that the rather self-serving goal of understanding more about participation is yet another occasion of asking something from the groups that will benefit the researchers more than other participants (who probably do not stand to gain from the publications that ensue), *would-like-to-meet* works to redress the immediate balance for those present in the room, in case other benefits do not accrue from getting involved.

Another practice we are trying out is compensation for loss of earnings. This acknowledges that two days spent working with us is two days when either an organization or an individual is 'out of pocket' because their labour was not used to its usual ends. We would distinguish this from paying participants to participate. It has very different ideological roots, although it appears similar once a standard compensation figure is proposed. By offering compensation, we are again drawing attention to our recognition of other participants as people with busy lives. And we are offering parity with us as researchers, since we are being paid to have this encounter.

We see compensation rather than payment as preferable. The literature on extrinsic motivation (e.g. Crompton 2010) suggests that doing an activity for external reasons can distort how it is conducted. Compensation is not an incentive; it is a starting condition showing respect. We put more value on the *would-like-to-meet* activity since it is not unrelated to the meeting activities as a whole. It will be interesting to see how this plays out. Our understanding of this exercise is that this form of exchange will be motivating: that participants will be motivated to engage by our obvious interest in their interests. This activity is an integral part of welcoming a variety of groups to work together and express their concerns, and to promoting a feeling that they are valued as having intellectual commitments of their own. And through the process of meeting a specialist chosen by them and supplied by the research group as an offering, the groups are anyway contributing to the shape of the summit and are therefore more able to reflect on shaping practices. In this sense, the presence of the *would-like-to-meet* strand is not redress; its function of acknowledging the purposes of the groups and providing key content is core to the workshop taking place.

Voice

The measures outlined above are aimed at encouraging members of our partner groups to see themselves as co-researchers and people whose interests, knowledge, opinions and ways of experiencing research are welcome in the project, and particularly at the principal research event of it, in doing exercises alongside the research group. The previous sections make clear what a diverse mix of people are involved. It will also be obvious that we are not speaking for them here. Indeed, this paper could look rather self-focused were this not a paper which we see as preparatory in the same way as the workshops are. We are deliberately not speaking for our partners, but we will be speaking with them as discussions continue.

The last substantive section of this paper addresses this issue: of who speaks, where and when, and for whom. Tritter and McCallum (2005) suggest that without clear evidence that involvement is linked to change, individual users or groups tend not to remain engaged. The *Democratising Technology* project (the forerunner of *Active Energy* and launch-pad for The Geezers' involvement with Light, see Light et al 2009 and Light et al 2010) identified

several aspects as necessary to participate in designing 'the network age' and, therefore, to make a change:

Forum – a space to contribute and people to listen
Motivation – the desire to contribute
Articulacy – the vocabulary and fluency to present one's ideas in a particular domain
Confidence – the assurance to become involved
Knowledge – enough understanding to have an opinion
Agency – an awareness that change is possible and of oneself as an agent of change
Association – the ability to interpret things together or see links, such as: old and new, people and things, etc.
Transformation – the act of combining to make new ideas, concepts and associations (Light et al 2009).

In that project, work between community groups and researchers focused on these largely internal aspects of participating. Gaining in confidence and sense of agency, participants gave voice to more articulated judgments about society and technology (Light et al 2009, Light 2011) and in some cases took related action (see HYPERLINK "http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/222061/The-Geezers-We-won-t-grow-old-gracefully"http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/222061/The-Geezers-We-won-t-grow-old-gracefully).

One of the stated objectives of *Participants Utd!* was to work with all the participants over the two day summit to identify whose views are heard and whose are not in the process of participating in research. A sub-goal was to learn what communities interpret as 'being heard'. This project then, looks outwards at *forum* and those external factors that make participation feel meaningful and fully-fledged.

Voice, power and forum

What does 'being heard' amount to? What is *forum*? Even among the research team, opinion differs and our answers are highly contextual. Further, it would not be desirable to give one definition; we have already noted that multiple perspectives are inevitable and surely 'being heard' means valuing individuals' contributions. We can juxtapose this notion of participation with one that emphasizes a more generic notion of power; as that of being in control. Arnstein's ladder (1969) was aimed principally at shaping health policy over 40 years ago and has been highly influential (fig 1). It describes types of participation in terms of the power they assign to participants. It supposes that there is power as such to hand over, but, like Cooke and Kothari (2001), it offers an important critique of tokenism.

Fig 1: Arnstein's ladder of participation, 1969

Replacing the target of her research - large health institutions - with academic institutions engaged in research activity is problematic. The lower rungs of her ladder do not map

directly onto design research based in communities, though notions of empowerment and the basic understanding of a peer relationship with participants in research projects are fundamental to successful engagement. Arnstein's model and her focus on power have been criticized extensively, for instance Tritter and McCallum (2005) note that this discounts the act of participation as a goal in its own right.

In our project, the ladder highlights tensions when we do consider power in the project and our agency as participants with a special brief. We might attempt to treat all participants as equal partners, but the funding body will treat us – and only us - as accountable for our funding. Further, we might hear the views of our partners and thus give the impression that academia is listening, but the discussion might not have impact by continuing into other orbits. So our own power is in question and we cannot *ensure* that the material we produce as a result of this work will make change or reach the people who might benefit from encountering it. We cannot promise that, even as the initiators of the project, we are capable of being more than token partners ourselves. We may manifest as powerful – and must take care not to exploit this – but we may, in reality, give a glimpse of a system that, far from treating academic knowledge as sacrosanct, actually involves a complex web of alliances and power games. Honesty about our status is part of what we are attempting to share in talking openly about the nature of activities and likely outcomes, both here and in all our dealings with our partners. In doing so, we hope to situate the knowledge(s) we are dealing with and open a discussion on what kinds of power communities can aspire to. Thus, our involvement as a participant group at the summit can be seen as a means of sharing in the audit of audiences, messages and forum.

Sharing credit

This discussion of voice raises the issue that processes of engagement, however transparent, like the tools themselves, are not neutral. A low level of literacy in one community ought to preclude written consultation, but replacing written consultation with another method or technology is little more than displacement. All participants in a process ought to share in the pursuit of the creation of new knowledge and its dissemination, or, more problematically for research institutions, they ought to share ownership of any intellectual property developed through their involvement in research. And they should benefit financially from its exploitation (rungs 6 – 8 of the ladder). Equally, participants must be recognized and credited with any changes to policy or incremental developments in technology, arts or science knowledge to which they have contributed through direct involvement in research.

Whilst the statement below - an amalgamation of University research guidelines drawn from three UK based institutions as part of a typical collaboration agreement – suggests positive values of openness and transparency, it fails to address or even recognize the fundamental importance and significance of the people participating in research as either the subjects of research projects or active participants working with researchers to explore

issues together.

Whilst recognising the need for researchers to protect their academic research interests in the process of planning of research, carrying out and writing up research and, where appropriate, handling intellectual property rights (IPR), the academy encourages all researchers to be open as possible in discussing their work with other researchers and with the public. Once results have been published, researchers are expected to make available relevant data and materials to other researchers, on request, provided that this is consistent with any ethical approvals and consents which cover the data and materials, and any intellectual property rights in them. (Egglestone, team notes, 2010)

Just like the consent form that ignores participants as contributors, this agreement supposes that knowledge is an academic preserve. Instead, we might view IPR as the most relevant forum that, as academics, we can share as we go forward in creating findings together. And while we do not predict patents in the current project, we do consider the politics of the commons to be relevant to all such endeavors.

A Creative Commons (CC) agreement, drafted by all parties involved in a research project at the outset of the process could make provision to address some power imbalances with researchers. This project is committed to using CC as a way of enabling all parties to own the data generated and the written outcomes that go to the different audiences, such as policy makers and academic journals.

Conclusion

We have described the commitments of the *Participants United!* project, premised on a form of social engagement which extends beyond the conventional parameters of participatory design and engaging knowledge from a range of community groups. PU! unites participants (denoting both researchers and community members) to create a summit at which the process of participation is the topic of research and process issues are foregrounded. In this way, we can consider how balance can be established and how gain can ensue for all stakeholders in the exchange of value.

Whilst the situations above tackle the process and outputs of collaborative research, the co-design of methods (or the agreement to reject research methods) is crucial to the success of any engagement. Current research enquiry procedures make this aspect difficult. Research projects require that research questions are stipulated before commencing field studies or identifying and consulting with research subjects. Whilst this approach is not unreasonable, it has weaknesses. It places emphasis on the researcher framing the research, the funding body commissioning the research and the institution contracted to deliver the outputs and evaluation. All three are gatekeepers by default. All parties must ‘sign-up’ to the research project before the researcher identifies any participants. Participants are then research *subjects* in the colonial sense of the word. Even adopting the most well-meaning and

equitable ways of working, this process is what Light and Miskelly (2008) have called *benign imposition*. *Participants Utd!* has worked within the current system of pursuing funding, then involving partners and gaining consent, but it has used the processes of the research to open up a critical space and time for discussion to try and lessen the imposition. One of the ideal outcomes of the project would be the adoption of a structure where researchers continue to be accountable to the funders, but are also more emphatically responsible to partners on the ground. At present, there is the potential to take what is needed to make the research successful with no thought to the needs of the community. Individual privacy may be respected because of the terms of the consent form, but there it ends.

Unfortunately, this imbalance of power is inherent in the current process of university research and it is difficult to imagine any significant improvement without dismantling the hierarchical commissioning structures and dispensing with the requirement to start research with a research question. Enabling individuals, groups and communities to set their own research agenda by framing the questions they would like to ask is fundamental to notions of agency and ability to design the engagement process.

In the project reported here, we have been striving to incorporate this in a small way, represented most clearly by the *would-like-to-meet* sessions, where partners' purposes are pursued, and the structures put in place to share ownership of outputs, such as the Creative Commons licence. As a consequence of working in this way, we trust that policy makers benefit from having a richer and more comprehensive evidence base.

This paper, then, is a description of how we have taken our theoretical commitments and operationalized them as ethical and politically informed empirical research into the dynamics of academic/community relations. We have aspired to integrate phenomenological (Schutz) and post-modern approaches to knowledge by adopting an action research agenda. We have made space, time and permission for different interpretations to appear at all stages of the process, even though we have not been able to build in as much collaborative development as we would have wished. And, beyond method, we have looked at opening the mechanisms of research to appropriation by all participants.

We have acknowledged the power relations in working in this way, building on the former work of each member of the team, but refusing to allow a belief in situated knowledge and the need for contextualization to cripple our ambitions to produce change. We have instead shown how we have constituted ourselves, as academic researchers, as partners managing the funds provided to execute the work and as participants, and detailed our plan to offer participant-making to our community partners. Given that our method is action research, it is only appropriate that we should have spelled out our assumptions and expectations ahead of testing them out in the world. This paper is a public statement of our beliefs, hopes and aspirations – the activities of the summit will reveal how far our projections of what ought to improve the dynamics of academic-community research are on target. So, this is only the

first installment, but, whereas the voices in this paper are those of early participants, the next accounts will be drawn from a far wider set of speakers and concerns.

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